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My Mulvey

Pensive, I sit at my desk surrounded by Mulvey's books, as I know that my own reflections must begin with the pleasure of reading, rather than viewing.

Possessive, I try to isolate quotations that speak for my enjoyment as a reader of her texts and that might connect, however loosely and aspiringly, my work to hers. Like Elena Ferrante going back through Elsa Morante's books, looking anxiously for a suitable citation that would pay homage to the writer whose work she loves, I cannot find what I remember where I remember it to be, the words having made errant and unforeseeable journeys in my mind. Then, as I slow down and re-immense myself in the reading experience, this simple reminder appears, akin to a mantra, of where things started for me, albeit unconsciously at the time: 'feminist curiosity can constitute a political, critical and creative drive.'¹ From reading to viewing such curiosity can and does drive me. The pensive and possessive spectator of Mulvey's more recent work in *Death 24x a Second* (2006) is a close relative of the earlier curious viewer of *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) who in turn re-works the even earlier patterns of looking established in her landmark essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). Mulvey's feminist aesthetics of curiosity are, for me, the foundation of the pleasure I take in her work and of what she continues to teach me about film and spectatorship.

I first read 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in the mid-1990s, when writing on feminist and queer theory prior to working on film. Its influence was

¹ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity: Cinema and the Mind's Eye* (London: BFI, 2013 [1996]), p. 78.

formative to my thinking, and although my own theoretical frameworks were more diverse, insofar as they stretched beyond psychoanalysis and encompassed sexualities beyond the heterosexual, there was something about the urgency of the argument in this text that spoke to me across these potential dividing lines. As a woman and a feminist, as well as a film viewer who had watched classical Hollywood movies unquestioningly in my teenage years, I found the argument on the destruction of pleasure in the name of progressive politics provocatively appealing. As I assessed the extent to which cross-identification with the male gaze structured the way women were required to see if they were to gain pleasure from these films, I perceived for the first time my transvestite clad viewing position, to coin the terminology of her 'Afterthoughts' on this essay, and this made me restless. Unsettling though it is to have one's previous certainties questioned as well as one's viewing problematized, the necessity of such a process was undeniable and was already reflected in what this essay inaugurated two decades before I came to it. It opened up an entire field of scholarship, and film studies as we know it today would have looked very different had this most cited of works not caused the revolution that it did in the mid-1970s. The curious spectator is not theorized as such in this essay, but she is nascent there nonetheless, born of the ceaseless troubling of the patriarchal status quo and a tacit part of the search for new ways of looking that enable women to see and be seen differently.

Mulvey first elaborates explicitly on the politics and aesthetics of curiosity in *Fetishism and Curiosity*. Her interest in fetishism in this text borrows from both Freud and Marx. The worker's labour under capitalism and the mother's body in patriarchy become the spectacular forms of commodity fetishism (Marx)

and fetishized femininity (Freud), which are the ways of misunderstanding the material bodies that are their points of departure. Fetishism, a male perversion for Freud, involves seeing and refusing to see simultaneously. For Freud, the little boy sees the mother's genitals, feels the threat of castration, and puts something in their place to protect against this, to disavow her lack. Already in 'Visual Pleasure' Mulvey shows how the workings of fetishism, especially the erotics of fetishistic scopophilia, place women in an idealized yet problematic space in classical Hollywood in particular. Yet she counters this fetishism in her later work with curiosity and thoughtfulness. The fetishist's refusal to see and believe is displaced by the search for knowledge, and the curious spectator emerges as a precursor to the pensive spectator of her more recent work.

Mulvey makes the connection between curiosity and pensiveness in *Death 24x a Second* when returning directly to her earlier theorizations of spectatorship. She speaks of trying to evolve an alternative spectator some time after 'Visual Pleasure', driven by curiosity rather than by voyeurism: 'Curiosity, a drive to see, but also to know, still marked a utopian space for a political, demanding visual culture, but also one in which the process of deciphering might respond to the human mind's long-standing interest and pleasure in solving puzzles and riddles. This curious spectator may be the ancestor of the pensive spectator.'² The cinema of delay that she is interested in as a result of focusing on new technologies of home entertainment that permit spectators to pause an image or slow down the progression of a film, multiplies the possibilities for contemplation and thought. The transformation of spectatorship that she called

² Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p. 191.

for in 'Visual Pleasure' has now taken place: 'The spectator's look, now interactive and detached from a collective audience, can search for the look of the camera while also asserting control over the look within the fiction.'³ Pensiveness meets possessiveness, but rather than re-enact the kind of fetishism she criticized in 'Visual Pleasure', she harnesses it in a critical feminist sense. This possessive spectator's new way of looking in delayed fashion, 'emasculates the coherent whole of narrative structure, "wounding" the surface.'⁴ Where the fetishist covered over the 'wound' he perceived on the mother's body, seeing and refusing to see simultaneously, the feminist now 'wounds,' and the implied attack on the patriarchal aspects of the structure could not be clearer in the language she uses. She embraces and deploys what was previously mobilized against her, re-taking possession of looking pensively.

The pensiveness that had as its precursor curiosity is more thoughtful than imagistic, but it is the blend of the two – thought and image – that is registered clearly in her theorizations in *Fetishism and Curiosity*. Rather than avoid the dual vision of fetishism, which both accepts and denies what is seen ('I know very well, but all the same'), curiosity as theorized by Mulvey relies on another version of dual vision to turn the binaries of inside and outside into a different topography that can better respond to and account for femininity. The eye and the mind's eye join forces here to construct an alternative kind of vision from that of the fetishist, seeing both what is inside and outside without distinction (the subtitle of *Fetishism and Curiosity* is 'Cinema and the Mind's Eye'). Mulvey writes: 'I visualise (in my mind's eye) the fetishised body falling

³ Ibid., p. 190.

⁴ Ibid., p. 179.

apart once it has been reconfigured, out of a spatial pattern of inside/outside, the masquerade/the abject, into an enigma or a pattern that can be decoded.’⁵ The power of seeing with the mind is something that Mulvey aligns with the feminine through a re-reading of the myth of Pandora. In Greek myth, the gods created the beautiful Pandora to seduce and harm man. She was sent to earth with a box containing all the evils of the world. Her curiosity got the better of her and she unleashed the evils on the world. Mulvey’s argument is that if Pandora just opens the box, the evils escape, but if she replaces the literal desire to see with a desire to decipher the enigma of the repressed, disavowed female body something different happens: ‘Pandora, caught in the myth, cannot make this step, but feminist theorists, seeking to translate the iconographies of the feminine to reveal their origins, can take her curiosity and transform it into a seeing with the mind.’⁶ This ‘seeing with the mind’ is not a form of imaging divorced from thought, nor is it aligned with a Romantic concept of the imagination, but is a critical and political way of seeing differently, shifting the Pandora myth from the visual register and into the theoretical domain. Pandora gives Mulvey a way of rendering more complex the gaze she theorized in ‘Visual Pleasure’, which is now active, investigative and associated with the feminine. This theory, put into practice, redefines the space of the imagination, politicizing it from a feminist point of view.

The possibility of seeing with the mind rather than only the eyes fascinates me, not just as a theoretical prospect but as an experiential mode of viewing that involves dual vision of eye and mind. In my own current research, I

⁵ Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, p. viii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

am interested in how this is activated in the work of experimental filmmakers, video artists, and those who work in the essayistic mode, engaging a contemplative gaze the better to stimulate the imagery of imagination. Fittingly, Mulvey is also pioneering in this regard. In advance of her explicit theoretical exploration of what it might mean to harness feminist curiosity politically, critically, and creatively, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) co-directed with Peter Wollen, wove intellectual puzzles through its avant-garde vision. Riddles invite inquisitive thought and signal that the images that these filmmaker-theorists create in their praxis are not just to be looked at. The Sphinx's most famous riddle is that posed to Oedipus, and everywhere in the background of this film is a quizzical dialogue with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis from a feminist perspective. From image to image at the outset, the re-filming of found footage leads to a re-thinking of the psychoanalysis of these forefathers, as the film re-stages the imagistic Imaginary in ways that displace and open up the Symbolic, proceeding on the basis of a mother-daughter relationship, rather than the more conventional privileging of the bond between father and son. Instead of stating the verbal riddle of the Sphinx and literally re-casting the Oedipal challenge in words, the film valorizes the visual dimension of grainy, disintegrating images in the first instance in order to emerge from the Imaginary differently from accepting the Law of the Father that founds the Symbolic. The riddle element of the title is not only given visual form, it is also spatialized, as is evident in the final sequence when Laura holds a maze puzzle in her hands and splits mercury in order to lead it through the maze to the centre. Solving this puzzle involves moving the mercury through space and in time, and the ensuing relationship built up between intellectual problem solving, imagery, and spatialization is

richly suggestive in its re-imagining of the relationship between thought and image, that need not always pass through language. A psychical topography emerges here through visual images, with a view to creating a new critical relation to the Symbolic order, sphinx-like in complexity: open-ended, non-linear, poetic, and disruptive.

Lying at the heart of Mulvey's filmmaking of the 1970s, then, is this curious re-inhabitation of the imagistic Imaginary, which has also come to light text after text in her theoretical writings, and which remains key to her theorizing today, albeit with a change of terminology. Her filmmaking foresaw one of the main threads of her theoretical thinking, containing the foreknowledge of her own theoretical curiosity. She has indeed revisited Pandora's box and succeeded in sustaining a gaze at what it concealed, transforming curiosity into seeing with the mind. Admittedly this is just one of the many strands that constitute her theorizing and filmmaking career to date, but it is an abiding source of inspiration to me: my Mulvey, who sees politically, critically, and creatively with the mind as well as the eye, has altered fundamentally the way I see and think.

Sarah Cooper